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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 001647

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SUBJECT: NEW PARLIAMENT: MINORITY GOVERNMENT WITH SPOTLIGHT
ON KING'S MAN

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Morocco's parliament has begun its new session with a minority government composed of 146 members of the 325 seat Chamber of Representatives. The failure of PM Abbas El-Fassi's coalition negotiations led to direct intervention by the Palace. The King reportedly gave a cabinet list to the PM designate, who passed it on to the parties. This sent one former majority party, the Mouvement Populaire (MP), into the opposition, depriving the coalition of a majority of seats. The government will for now remain in power thanks to the support of a new 30-plus seat voting bloc, "Tradition and Modernity," formed by Fouad Ali El-Himma, royal intimate and newly minted MP.

¶2. (C) El-Himma, longtime "number two" in the Kingdom, has now regained a high-profile role for himself in national political life following his surprise resignation as Deputy Interior Minister in the summer. His hardball political style was revealed when he dropped one of his early bloc allies for being too familiar. Many expect that El-Himma will use the new parliamentary bloc as the base for a new political party, possibly in the process positioning himself to replace PM El-Fassi, whose government is widely perceived as fragile. For now, however, El-Himma has simply been elected Chairman of the parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Religion, a position which will allow him to remain involved with the Sahara negotiations, which he used to lead. End summary.

An Exclusive Club

¶3. (C) In offering support in early October to the Prime Minister designate, the Tradition and Modernity bloc allowed Abbas El-Fassi, by then beleaguered after three weeks of deadlocked negotiations with the political parties, to piece together a minority governing coalition, composed of four parties which together hold only 146 of the parliament's 325 seats. Within ten days of the King's opening of parliament, El-Himma was elected, with a comfortable majority of 195 votes, Chairman of Parliament's committee for Foreign Relations, Islamic Affairs, and Defense, easily the most important of parliamentary committees.

¶4. (C) Political party contacts tell us many members of parliament, particularly from the leftist USFP and Berber-centric Popular Movement, each facing internal leadership crises, have sought membership in the Tradition and Modernity Bloc, but have been turned away by El-Himma, seemingly content with the current size of the bloc. After

Abdullah El-Kadiri, leader of the National Democratic Party (PND), claimed that Tradition and Modernity had merged with his party, El-Himma delivered a stinging rebuke, describing Kadiri's statement as "inopportune and unfounded." This rebuke notwithstanding, at least eight of PND's 14 MPs remain within the Tradition and Modernity bloc.

A Step Backward for Democracy?

15. (C) Veteran politician Driss Lachgar, a senior member of the leftist USFP, warned of El-Himma's undemocratic power-grab during an October 19 meeting with Polcouns. El-Himma's appearance in the parliament was bringing Morocco back to the politics of the 1960's and 70's when King Hassan II's strong-armed henchmen, Interior Ministers Oufkir and (later) Basri, overtly intervened in party politics. El-Himma's *raison d'etre* in parliament, Lachgar suggested, was to expand the Palace's control and influence, subverting the opposition. Lachgar evinced outrage that El-Himma would flout Morocco's Political Party law, by plucking MPs from other parties to join his group. (In point of fact, the law allows MPs to join voting blocs but not to switch party affiliation in the course of their elected terms.)

16. (C) Some commentators in the Moroccan press have gone even further in their criticism: Ali Amar, Editor of the leading (French) weekly "Le Journal," described El-Himma as a "cannibal," who, in moving into parliament, had "devoured" the Prime Minister and the cabinet, representing the Palace's insatiable appetite to "nibble away" at all the political power in Morocco. The El-Himma factor in parliament, he

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wrote, represented the "decline of politics" in the country and the expansion of Palace power "on all fronts."

...Or a Necessary Consolidation?

17. (C) Other Moroccans have welcomed the emergence of El-Himma's Tradition and Modernity bloc. A senior PND leader recently told poloff she saw El-Himma's project as a "healthy effort" to counter the "balkanization" of Morocco's political landscape. Although the King, cabinet ministers, and outside observers have called for consolidation of political forces in Morocco, the opposite has been occurring: The number of political parties in parliament increased after the September elections from 22 to 24. While the law prohibits MPs elected as representatives of one party to migrate to another, their consolidation into a smaller number of voting blocs, in this view, can only streamline the political process and minimize partisan gridlock. That El-Himma, rather than an outsider or a rebel, would be the one to preside over this consolidation, can only make the process more desirable in the eyes of the Palace.

The Way Ahead

18. (C) Many observers believe that the Tradition and Modernity bloc is a precursor to a political party El-Himma intends to form, perhaps with "no ideology other than advancing the Palace's agenda," as one political party contact suggested to us. Barring a change in the current political party law, El-Himma would not be able to draw from MPs elected as members of other parties, but the Tradition and Modernity bloc could nonetheless be a useful platform from which to organize a party. Others believe that, in building a strong political base within the parliament, El-Himma is positioning himself to succeed El-Fassi as Prime Minister, with many, even coalition partners of the government, predicting that El-Fassi's government will be

short-lived. At a minimum, it is clear that El-Himma will be a key power broker in the parliament and likely a significant force in broader politics, in the coming years.

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